UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

Case No. 95-CV-72397-DT

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In Re:

DOW CORNING CORPORATION,

*Debtor.*

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HON. DENISE PAGE HOOD

*MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER ON REMAND REGARDING SECTION 1334(C) ABSTENTION*

## I. *INTRODUCTION:*

This matter is before the Court on remand from the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. *In re: Dow Corning Corporation*, Nos. 95-2034/2082/2084/2106/2107, 86 F.3d 482 (6th Cir. 1996) (Amended). This Court previously entered an order finding that it did not have subject matter jurisdiction over the tort claims against the nondebtor defendants pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 157(b)(5). The Sixth Circuit reversed this Court's determination on this issue and found that this Court had subject matter jurisdiction over the tort claims pending against the nondebtor defendants pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 157(b)(5). The Sixth Circuit remanded this case on the issue of whether or not this Court should abstain from the tort claims against the nondebtors pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(1) and/or (2).

II. *ANALYSIS*:

A. *Whether this Court must abstain or, alternatively, exercise its discretion to abstain pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c).*

1. *Mandatory Abstention.*

The Sixth Circuit has concluded that this Court has "related to" jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1334(b) over the actions pending against the nondebtors Dow Chemical, Corning Incorporated, Minnesota Mining, Baxter, and Bristol-Myers Squibb in nonbankruptcy forums nationwide. *In re Dow Corning Corp., supra* at 494. In a section 157(b)(5) motion, an abstention analysis is required. *In re Pan American Corp.*, 950 F.2d, 839, 844 (2nd Cir. 1991); *In re Dow Corning Corp., supra* at 497. The Tort Claimants' briefs and other claimants' objections and responses to the nondebtors' motions under Section 157(b)(5) requested this Court to abstain under 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c).

Section 1334(c) qualifies Section 1334(b)'s broad grant of jurisdiction. *In re Dow Corning Corp.* at 497. There are two types of abstention under Section 1334(c): discretionary abstention under 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(1) and mandatory abstention under 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(2). *Id.* Mandatary abstention will be addressed first.

In order for mandatory abstention to apply, a proceeding must: 1) be based on a state law claim or cause of action; 2) lack a federal jurisdictional basis absent the bankruptcy; 3) be commenced in a state forum of appropriate jurisdiction; 4) be capable of timely adjudication; and 5) be a non-core proceeding. *Id.*

As to the first factor, the claims and causes of action at issue against the nondebtors are personal injury tort claims which are essentially state law claims. Addressing the second factor, this Court notes that the Sixth Circuit held that this Court has "related to" bankruptcy jurisdiction over the nondebtors. The personal injury tort actions against the nondebtors are not proceedings which need a determination under

the bankruptcy laws and do not arise in a bankruptcy case. Absent the bankruptcy of the debtor in this matter, this Court would lack federal jurisdiction over the actions against the nondebtors.[1] With respect to the third factor, there have been no allegations that the actions against the nondebtors have not been commenced in a state forum of appropriate jurisdiction. Satisfying the fourth factor, the parties have informed the Court that there are numerous cases ready for trial against the nondebtors. Furthermore, the Honorable Sam C. Pointer, Jr. in his March 19, 1996 (Order 29) and April 16, 1996 (Order 29B) orders and the Multidistrict Litigation Panel's April 10, 1996 Conditional Remand Order, indicate there are numerous cases against the nondebtors which are indeed ready for trial.

Considering the fifth factor, the Court must determine whether the actions against the nondebtors are non-core proceedings. There are two categories of core proceedings: proceedings "arising under" title 11 and proceedings "arising in" title 11. *In re Harris Pine Mills*, 44 F.3d 1431, 1435 (9th Cir. 1995), *cert. denied*, 115 S.Ct. 2555 (1995). Proceedings "arising under" title 11 "involve a cause of action created or determined by a statutory provision of title 11." *Id.* Proceedings "arising in" title 11 are a reference to those "administrative" matters that arise only in bankruptcy cases and are not based on any right expressly created by title 11, but nevertheless, would have no existence outside of the bankruptcy. *Id.* Section 157(b)(2) provides a nonexclusive list of proceedings

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[1] The only cases against the nondebtors over which this Court would have jurisdiction, sitting in the Eastern District of Michigan, are those cases that involve complete diversity. The Court notes that most of the cases involving the nondebtors also include the Debtor Dow Corning Corporation which would defeat this Court's diversity jurisdiction. (*See* the Court's Discretionary Abstention analysis, *infra*.) The Court notes that mandatory abstention also apply to removed cases. *William v. Shell Oil Co.*, 169 B.R. 684, 690-691 (S.D. Cal. 1994). The Court further notes that absent the bankruptcy, the Court has no jurisdiction over the cases against the nondebtors where the claims arose outside of the Eastern District of Michigan.

which are core proceedings. Non-core proceedings are only "related to" a case under title 11. *Id.* at 1435. A non-core proceeding "does not invoke a substantive right created by the federal bankruptcy law and is one that could exist outside of bankruptcy." *Id.*

Personal injury tort or wrongful death claims are excluded from the catalog of core proceedings by 28 U.S.C. § 157(b)(2)(B) and (O) which state in pertinent part:

> (b)(2) Core proceedings include, but are not limited to—
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> (B) allowance or disallowance of claims against the estate or exemptions from property of the estate, and estimation of claims or interests for the purposes of confirming a plan under chapter 11, 12, or 13 of title 11 *but not the liquidation or estimation of contingent or unliquidated personal injury tort or wrongful death claims against the estate for purposes of distribution in a case under title 11*;
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> * * *
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> (O) other proceedings affecting the liquidation of assets of the estate or the adjustment of the debtor-creditor or the equity security holder relationship, *except personal injury tort or wrongful death claims*.

28 U.S.C. § 157(b)(2)(B) and (O) (emphasis added). *In re Hughes*, 98 B.R. 115, 118 (D.C. 1988). The actions against the nondebtor defendants are non-core proceedings under 28 U.S.C. § 157.

Section 157(b)(4) provides that "[n]on-core proceedings under § 157(b)(2)(B) of title 28 [liquidation of personal injury tort or wrongful death cases], shall *not* be subject to the mandatory abstention provisions of Section 1334(c)(2)." *In re Pan Am*, 950 F.2d at 845; 28 U.S.C. § 157(b)(4). As indicated above, the non-core proceedings included in Section

157(b)(2)(B) are "liquidation or estimation of contingent or unliquidated personal injury tort or wrongful death claims *against the estate* for purposes of distribution in a case under title 11." (Emphasis added). Here, the personal injury and/or wrongful death tort actions are *not* "against the estate" of the debtor but against the nondebtors. Consequently, the non-core proceedings and actions against the nondebtors are *not* exempt from mandatory abstention under Section 157(b)(4). Moreover, 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(2) provides for mandatory abstention in cases involving state law claims for which the sole basis of bankruptcy jurisdiction is "related to" jurisdiction. *Celotex Corp. v. Edwards*, 115 S.Ct. 1493, 1506, note 10 (1995) (Stevens, J., dissenting). In the instant case, the Sixth Circuit held that this Court had Section 1334(b) or "related to" jurisdiction over the actions pending against the nondebtors in nonbankruptcy forums nationwide. *In re Dow Corning*, *supra* at 494. Based on the above, the Court finds that the four factors calling for mandatory exemption under Section 1334(c)(2) have been met.

2. *Discretionary Abstention.*

Alternatively, the Court exercises its discretion to remand pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(1). Section 1334(c)(1) provides:

> Nothing in this section prevents a district court in the interest of justice, or in the interest of comity with State courts or respect for State law, from abstaining from hearing a particular proceeding arising under title 11 or arising in or related to a case under title 11.

In *In re White Motor Credit*, 761 F.2d 270 (1985), the Sixth Circuit noted:

> ... federal courts should be hesitant to exercise jurisdiction when state issues substantially predominate, whether in terms of proof, of the scope of

> the issues raised, or of the comprehensiveness of the remedy sought.

*Id.* at 274 (quotations omitted). Here, the personal injury/tort claims against the nondebtors are predominantly state law claims. The proof and scope of issues in dispute and the comprehensiveness of the remedies sought varies state to state. The Sixth Circuit in *In re White Motor* further noted that:

> ... in large bankruptcy cases with hundreds or even thousands of tort litigants beating on the door of one federal judge, ... at least judicial economy and expeditiousness, may depend on the court's authority to refer cases to other courts. Since the 1984 Bankruptcy Act prevents reference of these tort cases to bankruptcy courts, as in the past, it makes good sense to give the district courts wide latitude in referring the cases through abstention to other courts.

*Id.* The Court finds that discretionary abstention from the cases against the nondebtors would best serve the interest of justice and comity. Waiting until the estimation and confirmation of a plan of reorganization before the actions against the nondebtors are liquidated would not result in a more precise estimation of the assets needed by the debtor's estate to cover any indemnification and contribution claims against the debtor's estate. The estimation of any possible indemnification and contribution claims by the nondebtors against the debtor's bankruptcy estate would not be any different than if the cases against the nondebtors proceed to trial at this stage. To the contrary, as the various trials proceed against the nondebtors, a clearer picture would emerge as to whether the nondebtors would have any indemnification or contribution claims against the debtor's estate.

The Sixth Circuit opinion addresses the Joint Insurance issue between Dow Corning, Dow Chemical and Corning Incorporated finding that the Court had "related to" jurisdiction based on the Joint Insurance between the parties. The

Sixth Circuit opinion does not address the Joint Insurance issue as it pertains to the abstention issue. This Court addresses this issue as it relates to the interest of justice and comity issues which must be addressed in an analysis of discretionary abstention. Although Dow Chemical has apparently notified insurers that it is asserting claims against the jointly-held policies, it has been argued that as to Dow Chemical, the joint policies are in fact excess policies and that Dow Chemical has sufficient primary insurance. (Ex. A, p. 5, Official Committee of Tort Claimants' Brief, filed June 7, 1996). The Sixth Circuit's opinion addresses the insurance issue from the point of view of whether the Debtor's estate will have sufficient resources. The Debtor itself has not put forth proof that its estate would be dissipated based upon the "threat" posed to those insurance policies by Dow Chemical and Corning Incorporated. In *The Matter of Zale Corp.*, 62 F.3d 746 (5th Cir. 1995), the Fifth Circuit found that even if the bankruptcy court had "related to" jurisdiction over certain insurance policies with indemnification contracts, a nondebtor should not be shielded by the powers of the bankruptcy court. *Id.* at 760-761. The Bankruptcy Code discharges the Debtor's liabilities and not those owed by third parties. *Id.* at 760, notes 42, 43, and 44; 11 U.S.C. § 524(e). If the Court does not abstain from the tort claims against the nondebtors, the tort claims against the nondebtors would effectively be determined by this Court which would be contrary to 11 U.S.C. § 524(e). Section 524(e) does not allow the Bankruptcy Code to be used to discharge the debts of nondebtors. *Id.*, at 760, notes 42, 43, and 44. The Court finds that the "threat" posed to the insurance policies by the nondebtors does not overcome factors in favor of discretionary abstention. Specifically, the Court finds the interests of justice and comity weigh in favor of discretionary abstention.

III. *CONCLUSION*:

This Court finds that the cases against the nondebtors are subject to mandatory abstention under 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(2). Alternatively, the Court finds that in the interest of justice, comity and judicial economy, it will exercise its discretion to abstain from the cases against the nondebtors under 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(1).

Accordingly,

IT IS ORDERED that the actions against the nondebtor defendants are subject to mandatory abstention under 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(2); alternatively,

IT IS ORDERED that the Court will exercise its discretion to ABSTAIN from the cases against the nondebtors under 28 U.S.C. § 1334(c)(1).

/s/ DENISE PAGE HOOD
DENISE PAGE HOOD
United States District Judge

DATED: JUL 30 1996